

File 3-30-12

# New audit *Daily Breeze* is critical of DCFS

**CHILDREN:** County agency called slow to probe abuse and neglect complaints.

By Rick Orlov Staff Writer

The troubled county Department of Children and Family Services came in for new criticism on Thursday with a California State Auditor report pointing out flaws in the agency's handling of child abuse and neglect allegations.

The report said DCFS had a backlog of at least 3,200 investigations into initial complaints of abuse or neglect that had been open more than the maximum 30 days.

In addition, a review of cases from 2008-2010 found that in only 31 percent of the cases did social workers do the appropriate assessments of a home before placing a child

there.

"This delay resulted in nearly 900 children living in placements that the department later determined to be unsafe or inappropriate," the report stated.

The audit attributed many of the department's problems to high turnover in its management.

The department has had four directors in one year and also saw a high turnover in key management positions, the report said.

"A general instability in management has hampered the department's ability to address its long-standing problems such as completing timely investigations and placement assessments," the review found.

"The turnover has impeded the department's ability to develop and implement a strategic plan

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# Oversight of child victims is criticized

Fri 3-30-12 LA Times

Report finds agency problems persist despite promises by county supervisors.

By GARRETT THEROLF

A report released Thursday by the state auditor describes widespread deficiencies in Los Angeles County's oversight of abused and neglected children, finding that problems with the speed and quality of investigations remain despite years of promises by the Board of Supervisors.

In July 2010 the department reported 9,300 child abuse investigations that were open longer than the state's 30-day deadline. Although the backlog has decreased substantially, in January it was still 3,200, more than twice as large as it was in July 2009, according to the audit. Many of the cases involve multiple children suspected to be in peril.

Troubling geographic disparities continued as well. The average number of uncompleted investigations between July 2009 and November 2011 in Compton's regional office was more than three times the average of other regional offices.

In recent years, state regulators gave the county a temporary waiver allowing social workers 60 days to complete investigations, but the decision relied on the county's promise to conduct more thorough inquiries.

The new standard was not properly communicated to social workers, however, and is not being met in most cases, the auditor said.

Assemblyman Henry Peera, the Fresno Democrat who called for the audit, said he would be sending a letter to California Department of Social Services Director William Lightbourne urging him to cancel the time extension "and return to the standard of 30 days that all other counties attempt to follow." Lightbourne's spokesman said Thursday

[See Children, AA6]

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## CHILDREN

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that would have provided cohesiveness to its various initiatives and communicated a clear vision to department staff," it said.

Other problems found by the audit included failure to meet timelines on monitoring children in their homes, failure to conduct background checks before placing children with relatives, delays in assessments on homes and caregivers and failure to make proper notifications on placements.

At the same time, the state said it found there is hope for improvement as the Board of Supervisors approved the appointment of Philip Browning as director in February and he has begun making changes.

Browning said he found the audit helpful.

"We appreciate the state auditor's reviewing our operations and look forward to working with them to resolve the issues highlighted in their report," Browning said. "Once we have completed our review of the audit, we will respond to

each concern."

Also, the state found the case workload was within established targets and employees responded positively to a survey about their work environment.

The state did make two specific recommendations that the agency needs to continue to monitor its backlog of investigations and deal with them in 30 days. Also, it recommended an assessment on whether more resources are needed to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said much of the audit dealt with issues that were in the past and have since been resolved.

"We brought Philip Browning in and he's a turnaround artist," Yaroslavsky said. "He has already cut the backlog by two-thirds and he's making other changes.

"A lot of the findings were about old issues and we did have problems. But, I have to say I think the department is in better shape than it's been in a long time."

rick.orlov@dailymnews.com

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Fr 3-30-12 LA Times

# Deficiencies remain in system, report says

[Children, from AA1]  
that the director was still studying the issues and would not say if the waiver will be rescinded.

When investigations were finally completed, auditors said, the county did not follow state laws requiring the results to be reported to the state Department of Justice's child abuse database. As a result, the county hamstrung its own workers, who routinely use the database to check the record for the same households while placing children there.

Philip Browning, director of the Department of Children and Family Services, said he appreciated the state report and that the county has completed a re-

view of the audit and "we will respond to each concern."

The audit also reported that county workers have removed thousands of children from their parents and placed them with family members without performing required safety assessments. In nine of 20 cases reviewed by auditors, the department failed to conduct criminal background checks before placing children with a relative. Between 2008 and 2010, the department assessed and approved less than a third of the homes and caregivers before placing children with relatives, the auditor said.

Nearly 900 children lived in homes of relatives that — once assessed by the depart-

ment — were determined to be unsafe or inappropriate. It typically took 43 days to either remove these children from the placements or reassess and approve the homes, the auditor said.

Browning said the homes had generally been checked for criminal and child abuse records and a home visit had taken place, but a detailed study of the home did not always take place. He said the county and the auditor had disagreed about whether the law required such a detailed study before children were placed in the homes.

Perea, however, said the law was clear and there was no basis for a misunderstanding. "It is upsetting to see that L.A. County ... was

to make the department a "national model" and is working swiftly to correct the agency's problems.

He said he made the unpopular decision to block employees from transferring away from underserved communities, and he is exploring financial incentives to keep them there. The quality of investigations is actually better than documents show, he said. Social workers are being given new tools to report their visits while they are in the field. And the department is relying heavily on statistics to keep workers accountable and identify problems.

"Philip Browning," Yaroslavsky said, "is one of the nation's great local government turnaround artists, and I feel very confident that these problems are in the past. He's putting an executive team in place that is outstanding. There are a lot of positive things going on in the department."

Browning said he told the board he needed two years garrett.therolf@latimes.com

## Sheriff releases previously concealed data on two reserves

[Reserve cars, from AA1]  
even though he wasn't doing work for the unit, and therefore, it was incorrectly assumed that his work was too sensitive for disclosure. Baca did not explain why his department initially refused to turn over information about the second reserve, Chester Chong, whose vehicle was assigned to Headquarters Bureau, which would not inherently indicate sensitive work.

in special treatment.

The department's reserves, who are paid a dollar a year, generally work under the supervision of full-time deputies. Tasks include administrative work and the transporting of evidence, though some volunteers make on-duty arrests and work in specialized units.

Last month, after The Times reported on concerns within the department about reserves who are do-

nors getting county cars — a perk most full-time deputies don't enjoy — sheriff's officials said they launched an audit.

Among the findings were that two reserve deputies who are political supporters of Baca — Chester Chong and Vincent Chong — were personally assigned county cars.

Chester Chong used 618 gallons of gas during a recent 10-month period. His duties

as a reserve are centered on picking up foreign dignitaries from the airport and coordinating their visits, officials said.

When The Times first inquired, a sheriff's spokesman initially denied that Vovos, a Baca fundraiser, was assigned a county car. But after The Times presented the department with conflicting evidence, the paper was told that Vovos did get a county car. Gas logs pre-

sent to the Board of Supervisors showed that though Vovos was the primary driver, other deputies used the car as well.

Some of the department's initial confusion, officials said, may have been because supervisors were assigning cars to individuals when the cars were meant to be pool vehicles.

robert.faturechi@latimes.com



## OPIN

## EDITORIALS

## THE NEXT D.A.

## It's a key question

Candidates for the L.A. County office should explain their position on charging juveniles as adults.

**D**O LOS ANGELES COUNTY prosecutors too often or too seldom use their power under 2000's Proposition 21 to charge an accused juvenile as an adult, without first submitting the question to a judge? Does "direct filing" against juveniles, as it is known, make residents safer? Is it a good escape valve for the justice system now that fewer juveniles can be sent to state youth camps, and now that prison realignment is making county jail space more difficult to come by?

Los Angeles voters need to know how well the six candidates for district attorney grasp the facts of direct filing and whether and how often — and why — they would exercise that option. It may be interesting to know how much money each candidate has raised, who has endorsed them and what they say about each other, but before making their decisions, voters must extract from the candidates more fundamental information about their knowledge, their attitudes, their values and their abilities. The attitude toward charging youths as adults is one of several key areas in which the candidates must be probed and prodded.

Trying juveniles accused of serious crimes as adults is nothing new; in fact, it was the norm until the last century, when California and other forward-looking states

began to grasp that juveniles are not wired like adults, and adult prosecutions and punishments don't have the same deterrent effect on younger offenders that they do on older ones. Californians also expressed through law the conviction that for many juvenile delinquents, the object of the justice system should be rehabilitation rather than punishment. Not every wayward teen is not every bad seed can be rehabilitated. But our values as a society require us to give them an honest chance at it.

Even after the creation of the juvenile justice system, California continues to use a process known as a fitness hearing, at which a juvenile court judge hears evidence and determines whether an accused minor's crime was so serious, whether he or she was so criminally sophisticated, had such a history of intractability and such a poor record in previous attempts at rehabilitation, that the juvenile system simply wouldn't help. L.A. County prosecutors use fitness hearings for the vast majority of minors charged with serious crimes. It's a good policy.

In some other counties, though, prosecutors far too often take advantage of powers they were granted just over a decade ago, when an electorate, frightened by news reports about out-of-control youths and rampant gang crime, adopted one of those tough-on-crime initiatives that Californians periodically adopt. Direct filing bypasses the judge and allows prosecutors the discretion to file against a juvenile as an adult.

Candidates to be the next L.A. County district attorney must make their intentions clear. Will they direct file more, or less — and why? An interested public is listening.